

## Children with *Keitai*: When Mobile Phones Change from “Unnecessary” to “Necessary”

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on children in Japan who begin using mobile phones (*keitai*) while in elementary school and will discuss aspects of parental–child relationships that involve *keitai* use. Firstly, this paper presents an overview of a Japanese society presently immersed in mobile media, focusing particularly on the spread of mobile media use to younger Japanese children. Data are presented from two research projects and analyzed to examine the cause of, and circumstances that lead to, child *keitai* use. Increasing social anxieties about safety and parental concern have reportedly led to increasing perception that *keitai* use is valuable in times of emergency, or in order to prevent crime, leading to a shift in attitudes towards children’s *keitai* use: that which was formerly considered “unnecessary” has now become “necessary”. However, the anxiety about safety is shared by almost all people and is therefore not itself a deciding factor regarding children’s *keitai* ownership. *Keitai* usage is, instead, prompted by several factors, some of which are not shared by children and parents. From this rift in reasoning emerges a game of tug-of-war over ownership and use between children and parents.

### 要約

本稿は小学生のケータイ利用に焦点をあてることで、日本の親子関係について議論するものである。まず、ケータイが埋め込まれている日本社会の状況を、特に若年層へのケータイ利用の広がり注目しながら概観した上で、二種類の調査結果を分析することで子どもにケータイ利用を促す具体的な要因を明らかにする。

近年、治安悪化に関する不安と子どもへの関心の高まりから、緊急時や犯罪に巻き込まれることへの備えとして、ケータイが位置づけられるようになってきている。それゆえ、以前は子どもには「不要」だと思われていたケータイが、「必要」だと認識されるようになってきているが、治安悪化に関する不安はほとんどすべての人に共有されているために、子どものケータイ所有の決定要因とは言えない。むしろ、子どもにケータイを買い与える際には、それぞれの家庭においてケータイを必要とする複

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数の具体的な要因があり、ケータイを持ちたい子どもと持たせたくない親との間で繰り広げられる「綱引き」もみられる。そして、このような状況は、新しいメディアであるケータイが社会に埋め込まれる交渉過程として理解できる。

**Keywords** Mobile phone · *Keitai* · Children · Family · Parent–child relationships

## 1 Introduction

With the increasing prevalence of the mobile phone, both its purposes and user base have broadened. Used in Japan almost exclusively as a business tool until the mid-1990s, *keitai* were then adopted by youth (mainly in their 20s) for personal use. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the *keitai* had become an item of necessity for both business and personal use by people of all ages.

By the end of June 2008, the number of *keitai* subscribers in Japan had reached 103.65 million. Factoring in the 4.6 million personal handyphone systems (PHS) subscribers, the portion of the population with a *keitai* now exceeded 85%. When compared to other post-industrial countries, however, this percentage is not atypically high. In fact, it is lower than might be expected. There are several possible reasons for this. For instance, since identification was not needed at the time of purchase when the prepaid cellular phone was first introduced in the market, it was often associated with crimes such as fraud and drug trafficking, making the carriers less interested in service expansion.<sup>1</sup> Although rates dropped as the *keitai* became popular, cheaper and more convenient services were not available. The moderate adoption rate might also have been due to the fact that until the popularization of the *keitai*, fixed-line services were available almost anywhere throughout the nation and public telephones were widely distributed outside the home. In short, although popular, the *keitai* did not become a necessity item—originally, it was an item that could be done without.

As is now widely acknowledged, these may also be the reasons why multifunctional capabilities for the *keitai* were developed. Presently, 85% or more of the cellular phones in use have Internet capabilities, and close to 90% are third-generation (3G) mobile phones. The *keitai* has become a tool for e-mail exchange, as well as for Internet access, albeit in a simplified form. With the standardized built-in scheduling and camera tools, the *keitai*'s uses for gaming, listening to music, using e-money, GPS functioning, television viewing, and myriad other capabilities have led to an increase in the actual number of users of each of these functions. No longer considered a telephone by young people, the *keitai* has become an e-mailing device, and this has spread as its core use among other age groups as well.

In this paper, when discussing the mobile phone in the context of Japan, the term “*keitai*” will be used to reflect the specificities that have just been described. The word “cellular phone” in Japanese is the four-character compound word “*keitai-denwa*” composed of the two words “*keitai* (portable)” and “*denwa* (telephone)”,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Japan's largest carrier, NTT DoCoMo, terminated the acceptance of new contracts in March 2005. The number of prepaid contracts is 1.72 million (as of the end of June 2008), which is about 1.66%.

each consisting of two Chinese characters (*Kanji*). But from the early stages of its popularization, *keitai-denwa* has been shortened to *keitai* in everyday speech. The word *denwa* has been eliminated.

The everyday term “*keitai*” (singular and plural) is used in this paper to emphasize the fact that these devices are embedded within a particular society we call “Japan” and, by extension, as grounding for the examination of Japan as a *keitai*-embedded society. However, the position here is not that phenomena surrounding *keitai* are necessarily exclusive or peculiar to Japanese culture. As posited by Ito (2005) in regard to the discussion of *keitai*, this paper argues against theorizing technology and society, or technology and culture, as separate entities; instead, it stresses their indivisibility. Furthermore, the use of the word *keitai* more appropriately reflects the development of multifunctional uses of the mobile phone in Japan as a multimedia terminal that no longer can be referred to merely as a “telephone”.

Under these circumstances, *keitai* use has recently been spreading among children, in particular elementary and junior high school students—an age group formerly regarded as having no need for them. Handsets marketed for use by children are equipped with standardized features such as crime prevention alarms and GPS functioning as child security measures to appeal to parents. In Japan, the growing perception that public safety is deteriorating has led to parental anxiety, and that alone has generated stronger appeal for the marketing premise that the key to parental assurance lies in child safety. Naturally, these phones have protective functions that serve to ease parent anxiety concerning the child’s *keitai* use, notably with regard to excessive use or access to unsavory websites. Moreover, numerous *keitai* on the market use “cute” characters which specifically and successfully appeal to children.

According to a survey conducted in September 2000, the percentage of *keitai* use among fifth or sixth grade elementary school students (10–12 years old) was 3.0% and 15.7% among junior high school students (12–15 years old; Miyaki 2005). By November 2005, the rates had increased sharply to 29.7% and 65.3%, respectively (Mobile Society Research Institute 2006). There are, however, many elementary schools where children are not allowed to bring their *keitai* to school, and even in cases where *keitai* are permitted, most have established restrictions on their use in school.

What then initiates a child’s *keitai* adoption, and what is the actual purpose of their use? This paper addresses these questions. It explores aspects of Japanese society as a backdrop for children’s *keitai* use in the context of popular discourses of “deterioration of public safety” and its effect on the parent–children relationship and *keitai* use. It furthermore introduces the results of two surveys concerning mothers and their children who use *keitai*.

The paper goes on to consider the accumulation of circumstances that triggers individual decisions by parents to give their child a *keitai*. It concludes that we are approaching a transition point, a degree of embedding of *keitai* use in everyday life where the *keitai*, assumed earlier to be “unnecessary” for children, is felt to have become “necessary”. As such, *keitai* use has become an essential aspect of the relationships between parents and children and in familial relationships. It is an integral part of everyday family life.

## 2 The Declining Age of *Keitai* Ownership

In the last few years, there has been a sharp increase in *keitai* ownership among children. With more than 95% ownership among senior high school students, schools that in the latter half of the 1990s had restricted its use have passed the stage of “tacit consent”, and now many use *keitai* as a means for communication among students and teachers as well as for e-mailing information about after-school club activity. Consequently, the age of *keitai* ownership has been decreasing, and though some regional variation exists, a majority of junior high school students and about 30% of those in elementary school in urban areas nowadays possess a *keitai* (Benesse Educational Research and Development Center 2005).

However, the purposes of *keitai* use and the factors that led to its initial ownership among these students are different for children in elementary school and for those in junior high and above. According to the aforementioned survey conducted by the Mobile Society Research Institute (2006), the primary motivating force behind *keitai* ownership among elementary school students (53.9%) was a child’s enrollment in cram school or after-school lessons, followed by the urging of parents or family members (19.1%). On the other hand, for junior high students, the most prevalent reason is the increase in *keitai* and PHS usage among peers (27.6%), followed by enrollment in cram school or after-school lessons (19.9%) and by a friend’s adoption of *keitai* (18.4%). Where the actual uses of *keitai* are concerned, elementary school students mainly used their *keitai* to contact their parents (88.8%), while for those in junior high, it was to contact friends (77.0%). In other words, in the former case, *keitai* usage was encouraged by parents more than by the children themselves.

What are the reasons then for a parent’s desire, and decision, for their child to use a *keitai*? To start with, the typical way Japanese children commute to school is a preexisting norm that must be understood. In Japan, when children attend elementary school, they generally commute to and from school by themselves, without their parents. While they are usually accompanied by siblings or neighborhood friends, depending on the location of their home or time of day, it is not unusual for a child to be unaccompanied. In addition, a perceived “deterioration of public safety” and a rising interest in children in Japan have added to the calls for *keitai* ownership.

This “deterioration of public safety” has been a noticeable concern since the latter half of the 1990s, an expressed public concern that reveals a certain state of moral panic (Hamai 2005). In particular, the strong sense that children’s safety is being undermined is a collective societal concern. In a 2006 survey conducted by the Japanese National Cabinet Office from June to July, 2006, in response to the question “Do you feel any apprehension that children in your immediate community are in danger of being victimized?”, 74.1% of the total of those surveyed (adults 20 years and older) responded “often” or “sometimes”. For age groups in greatest contact with children, the respective responses were 83.4% for those in their 30s and 86.1% for those in their 40s.

However, looking at published figures regarding crimes against children in the 25 years from 1980 to 2005, the percentage of children under the age of 15 murdered and the overall mortality rates decreased (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, “vital statistics”); in other words, there was no apparent decrease in statistical levels of “child safety”. Moreover, after the mid-1990s, the reported number of

kidnappings remained at 80–150 a year, with no indication that they are presently on the rise.<sup>2</sup> In other words, any perceived “deterioration of public safety” is based more on a recent collective societal view rather than on an actual observed increase in significant violent acts against children. Moreover, in the aforementioned Cabinet Office (2006) survey, “widespread TV and newspaper coverage of incidents of child victimization” was the reason given by most respondents for their anxiety over the possibility that their child might be victimized (85.9%). This type of response was clearly more prevalent than other reasons given, which varied from the more specific “because community bonds are weak, and I don’t really know the faces of even neighboring residents” (33.2%) or “because my child gets home from their after-school lessons late sometimes (31.1%) to the reason that “there are roads, parks and parking lots in the neighborhood that are dark and are largely unfrequented (30.8%).”

This myth of the deterioration of public safety, in particular where children are involved, correlates to the overall concern for children that has risen along with modernization. In response to the popular belief that discipline in the home has deteriorated, Teruyuki Hirota—who has researched material from the Meiji period up until the present—counters with a theory from a social history perspective. He argues that parents today are in fact more passionate about their children’s education and discipline (Hirota 1999). Because of this increasing concern for children, their safety has become an issue of greater focus and concern. Additionally, declining birthrates and improved infant mortality rates have led to the general appeal and adoption of the value system that can be summed up in the expression “we must raise our precious few children even better”.

At the same time, as a result of the strong emergence of “family centrism”, Hirota claims that social standards have reached a point where “the family as a unit must wholeheartedly accept ultimate responsibility for their child’s education” (p. 127). However, “education” here refers not only to a scholastic “outcome” but also to the goal of nurturing a child’s overall social fitness. Because they take such a strong interest in their child, parents feel a need to make arrangements for their child’s daily activities.<sup>3</sup> Alongside these family management practices are more basic goals about the management of safety, or risk, or—perhaps more so—of anxiety. Thus, the most commonly cited reason why children are made to carry *keitai* is to assure the parent of their child’s safety. However, it can also be argued that this practice is a form of child “surveillance” (Matsuda 2007), which David Lyon (2001) posits has the dual meaning of “care” and “control”. In this sense, *keitai*-embedded relationships may involve a sense of security that is awkwardly polyvalent—to feel that children are secure (notions of care, of safety, or connectedness) through the possibility of contact, versus to actively secure (or control) these same children through observation and overt or covert regulation. The relationship between the mobile and risk is similarly Janus-faced. The *keitai* is thought in some ways to manage or

<sup>2</sup> Data for under 13s; for all ages the figures were 200–300 (National Police Agency, *White Paper*).

<sup>3</sup> For more on the discussion of the “family who educates”, based on processes first established among the new urban middle class (professionals and salaried workers) of 1910 to 1920 (Sawayama 1990), see Kambayashi (2004) who discusses the popularization and diversification of these norms after the mid-1950s, along with current issues.

mitigate risk through the capacity to be in full-time potential contact with parents and/or guardians. But *keitai* also generate risk—or at least anxiety—through full-time potential contact with unauthorized, inappropriate, or simply undesirable people and online content (significantly, these can be kept private or hidden from parental surveillance). These contradictions are glanced at later in this paper in the presentation of the data—I hasten to add that more exploration of these issues is certainly possible and the brief consideration outlined here merely gestures towards the notion that familial management of risk, or anxiety, through the *keitai* as a medium of surveillance is referred to, especially by parents of young *keitai* users, as being of increasing importance.

On the other hand, as described in Section 1, at the time *keitai* started becoming popular in Japan, fixed line telephones were common in households, and outside of the home—in town and on the streets—public phones were widely available. Unlike other countries or regions where fixed-line communication infrastructure is less developed, in Japan, the *keitai* as a means of communication was not a form of media that was initially indispensable. In fact, it is strictly speaking an unnecessary item that became popular for use when in transit or as a personalized telephone. It is with this “initially unnecessary” aspect of *keitai* in mind that I posit that the management of risk and the assurance of safety is not the predominant factor in the decision to get a *keitai* despite popular perceptions that this may be so.

Here, I present an overview of the transition of the image of the *keitai* as discussed in a previous paper (Matsuda 2005). In Japan, the popularization of the cellular phone began in the first half of 1990s. At first, its core users were professional men (mostly) who needed to be reached at all times for business purposes, thereby inviting pity for these work-related impositions. Other negative aspects, such as poor *keitai* manners in public, also drew attention. This image of the *keitai* was transformed by its adoption by younger people (replacing pagers) in the mid-1990s.

Concern arose in respect to the impact on young people’s interpersonal relationships when they began to use *keitai* as a telephone for personal communications which allowed them to be privately contacted anytime and anywhere. Social anxieties with regards to these new forms of media were similar to those observed earlier at the emergence of television and film. Along with its widespread adoption among young people, voices expressing stances such as “young people prefer indirect contact via *keitai* because they are socially inept” or “our child’s relationships with friends has worsened since they began using *keitai*” have been more frequently heard. Moreover, actual *keitai* use by high school students, in which mail exchange between friends invariably cuts into time for study or even sleep, was a source of concern for parents. The image that “*keitai* equals bad” became further established by reports of involvement with criminal acts, brought about by access to *deai-kei* (encounter/dating) sites.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, despite these emerging areas of concern, the *keitai* became a necessary item for young

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<sup>4</sup> The practice of *enjo kosai*, where school-aged girls meet with, go on dates with, and may also perform sexual acts with older men, was one of the major concerns associated with these dating sites from the mid-1990 to mid-2000



people for family and school-related daily communication and certainly also for social exchange among friends.

At present, *keitai* adoption has spread not only to children in their late teens but to elementary and junior high school students as well. Parental concern is even greater that these younger children will access dating sites, pornography and violence, or that they will run into problems with “dangerous others” in the form of fraud or kidnapping. The *keitai* has also drawn concern from parents in terms of its function as a tool for bullying among elementary and junior high school students. Also, because a child is able to make direct contact with their friends through *keitai*, it becomes difficult for a parent to keep an eye on a child’s interpersonal relationships. In addition to this, *keitai* addiction, defined as a child’s incontrollable compulsion to contact friends to the point of sacrificing study or sleep, has become an issue of concern as well (what in fact is the greatest concern for parents is that the core party of contact for those children of junior high school age and older shifts from their parents to their friends). Also, while actual *keitai* charges are getting less expensive with plans such as fixed rates and family discounts, the *keitai* is still considered a luxury item for children. In other words, the *keitai* is a medium that, if possible, parents still do not entirely want their children to use.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, as has been mentioned, most parents have developed a strong sense that their children are at risk, and thus, once they start to employ *keitai* as a measure for ensuring “child safety”, it is difficult to choose not to use it as such. Likewise, once a child’s peers start to use *keitai*, or when the *keitai* is used for school or after-school club activities, these circumstances will prompt a child’s desire to own a *keitai*. In fact, most children will own a *keitai* by the time they are senior high school students. In a sense, *keitai* is thought of as a necessary evil for children, and parents are obliged to let their children have a *keitai*. Given these apparent contradictions and conflicting motivations, what then are the main reasons for a parent’s decision regarding their child’s *keitai* ownership?

This paper analyzes the results of data from two surveys in response to that question. The first is a questionnaire survey conducted from December 2006 to January 2007 with junior high school students in their second year (ages 13 to 14) who live in the Tokyo Metropolitan District (within the 23 central wards) and their mothers (research representative: Professor Yoshiaki Hashimoto of the University of Tokyo). There were a total of 311 valid pair responses. In this survey, *keitai* users were asked about the circumstances surrounding their usage and any shifts in their perception or behavior since they began to use a *keitai*, while both mothers and children were also asked about their value orientations and social skills, their sense of parent–child relationships, their opinions concerning *keitai*, and the like.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, according to a survey inquiring what age group is generally appropriate for starting usage of various media, for *keitai*, the majority responded senior high school students (37.6%), followed by college students (20.4%), working adults (17.8%), junior high school students (14.0%), and only then elementary school students (5.2%). This survey took place from November to December 2001, and thus considering the subsequent trend towards a decreasing age of *keitai* adoption, it can be assumed that there would now be a higher rate of those who select elementary and junior high school students. Even at the time of the survey, a majority of people replied that elementary school students were a suitable age group for all the other media, in particular computers, television, video games, newspapers, and cartoons (Mobile Communication Research Group 2002).

The other study was conducted via interviews with mothers of elementary and junior high school students who had already required their child to carry a *keitai*, or else were planning on doing so in the near future. This study was carried out from November 2006 to February 2007 by the author of this paper with 13 mother respondents living in a residential district of the Tokyo suburbs. In this study, the author made inquiries about their views in relation to *keitai* and their use of media in general as well as their reasons for having their child carry a *keitai*, the actual circumstances of its use, and any apprehensions concerning their child's *keitai* possession. The length of these interviews was from one to one and a half hours long.<sup>6</sup>

### 3 Needs for and of the Cram School

Firstly, focusing on the results of the questionnaire survey, the following section describes the observed characteristics of elementary school students who were early adopters of *keitai*.

In the survey, among the 311 second year junior high school student sample, 233 own a *keitai* (75.2%), with a higher percentage among female users (69.7% male and 80.4% female,  $p < 0.05$ ). Among the owners, 39.5% have owned a *keitai* since elementary school, while the remaining 60.5% did not own a *keitai* until reaching junior high school. Identifying the former as the “elementary school student group” and the latter as the “junior high school student group” (hereafter the ESS group and the JHSS group, respectively), a number of distinctions between the two were observed. These are outlined below.

Firstly, mothers were asked to respond to the statement, “Crime incidents and accidents involving children are on the rise”, choosing from the following four responses: “agree”, “partly agree”, “partly disagree,” or “disagree”. Nearly 95% of the respondents chose one of the first two options (“agree” being 63.99% and “partly agree” at 30.87%). More significantly, however, there was no correlation between the mothers’ concerns about public safety and either (a) whether their children had a *keitai* or (b) the time the children begin using their *keitai*. In other words, while parents generally seem to claim that risk and anxiety management are primary reasons for *keitai* use within families and especially by younger children, this does not seem to be the actual basis for the decision to get a *keitai* for their children. So,

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<sup>6</sup> While the decision to focus on mothers only, not fathers, as the subject of investigation may be open to dispute, in Japan, there is a strong tendency for the responsibility and burden of housework and child care to center on the mother. For instance, according to Ota (2006), when comparing the results of an Eurostat (2004) survey on how Europeans spend their time in everyday life in ten European countries with those of Japan, while employed men in Japan spend 52 min on housework during weekdays, their European counterparts spend between 112 to 144 min (employed women: Japan, 218 min; Europe, 191 to 264 min). Moreover, according to a survey conducted in 2003 by Japan’s National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2007), 50.5% of the decisions concerning child care and education were made by the wife, 46.1% by both husband and wife, and 3.4% by the husband. Furthermore, when married couples were asked about child care responsibilities, more than half of them responded that the wife bears over 90% of the burden. In future studies, although it may be necessary to investigate other family members—in particular fathers—based on the aforementioned facts, there is sufficient validity in the decision to use only mothers as the subject of investigation.



whereas in public discourse *keitai* are described as a tool for ensuring “child safety” and many parents replicate this by saying that the deterioration of public safety is the reason why they had their elementary-school-aged children get a *keitai*, these anxieties about safety are common among almost all people and therefore not to be regarded as a deciding factor regarding the ‘if’ or ‘when’ of their children’s *keitai* ownership.

The survey next explored whether there were differences between the ESS and JHSS groups in regard to their value orientations or their sense of parent–child relationships from the perspective of the children themselves or of their mothers. Furthermore, it sought to observe whether there were differences in such factors as their current usage of *keitai*.

Firstly, there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in terms of such aspects as the children’s value orientations or their general sense of trust, their friendships or their parent–child relationships.<sup>7</sup> Although the mother’s value orientations, general sense of trust, social skills, sense of their parent–child relationship, child-rearing sensibilities, etc. were examined,<sup>8</sup> there were no statistically significant differences between the ESS and JHSS groups. In other words, there was no reportable relationship between the “consciousnesses” of children, or of their mothers, and the time the children began using their *keitai*. Moreover, from the research, little difference between the ESS and JHSS groups could be seen regarding the children’s *keitai* usage or the influence of its use.<sup>9</sup> The only apparent difference was the tendency for those among the ESS group to affirm that through *keitai* use, “associations with friends were deepened” ( $p < 0.005$ ). While there was a significant difference between number of contacts in their personal *keitai* directories (65.36 for the ESS group and 48.65 for JHSS group,  $p < .005$ ), there was no statistically significant difference in the children’s awareness that they were able to “widen their associations with a variety of friends”.

<sup>7</sup> For the eight items concerning values, such as “One can do whatever one wants as long as it does not trouble other people” or “It is foolish to be diligent and work hard”; six items concerning everyday problematic behavior, such as “I don’t go home even past midnight” and “I go to school late”; six items concerning general sense of trust such as “On the whole, people are basically honest”, “On the whole, people are trustworthy”; 14 items concerning social skills including “Conversations with strangers usually flow well” or “I am skillful in helping strangers”; and nine items concerning the sense of parent–child relationships such as “(Your mother) does not know who you really are” or “(Your mother) is strict about manners”, respondents had to select one of the following responses: “applies”, “somewhat applies”, “slightly applies” or “does not apply”.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to the same items concerning values, general sense of trust, and social skills for the children, there were 13 items concerning the sense of the parent–child relationship such as “I often scold my child without realizing it” or “When my opinions differ from my child’s we discuss the issue until we reach a mutual agreement”; and 17 items concerning the sense of child-rearing such as “I believe children have the strength to find their own direction in life”, or “I think I might have made a mistake in the way I raised my child”, to which the respondents had to select from the same four responses.

<sup>9</sup> For the nine items concerning *keitai* use including “I’m not concerned about the time when calling my friends” or “I keep my *keitai* switched on 24 hours a day”; a total of seven items in addition to those two mentioned in this sentence, such as “I quarrel more with my parents”; and eight items concerning changes in the daily life from *keitai* use such as “I gained freedom in my independent activities” or “There are times I’m careless about studies because of *keitai* use”, respondents again had to select from the same four responses.

The most significant distinction between the ESS group and the JHSS group concerned *keitai* usage among family members. In response to questions regarding the purpose of voice calling and e-mailing their parents via *keitai*, in every instance [“to get picked up” (ESS group 50.0%, JHSS group 31.2%,  $p < 0.005$ ) or “to communicate about meetings or promises” (ESS group 56.5%, JHSS group 42.6%,  $p < 0.05$ )], the ESS group used their *keitai* to call more frequently.

Concerning what initiated their *keitai* acquisition, those in the ESS group attributed a clearer purpose to its use. This is seen in the responses to questions about why they were made to carry a *keitai*: “I was asked to carry one by my parents” (ESS group 35.9%, JHSS group 20.6%,  $p < 0.01$ ), “Because I thought it would be useful in the case of an emergency or urgent business” (ESS group 80.4%, JHSS group 68.8%,  $p < 0.05$ ), and “Because I get home late from cram school or after-school club activities” (ESS group 53.3%, JHSS 38.3%,  $p < 0.05$ ).

The initiator of children’s *keitai* ownership was also different in each group. In the JHSS group, an overwhelming majority of the children themselves brought up the issue of *keitai* ownership (73.0%, followed by their mothers at 13.5 %). For the ESS group, those percentages were 48.9% and 34.8% ( $p < 0.001$ ), respectively. In this ESS group, although the children themselves harbored desires for *keitai*, instances where the parents were the instigators for the acquisition of the *keitai* were also significant.

How might we account for this apparent difference between the groups? In one sense, the *keitai* has very recently become more important, as mentioned earlier, as a tool for coordinating family activities and managing family life, for instance being used to call to arrange to get picked up by parents. This usage also relates to the concerns mentioned earlier about safety and the management of risk and of anxiety—in this sense, it is a matter of perceived crime prevention [this also leads to a significant gender difference, with a female majority in the ESS group (67.4%) and a male majority in the JHSS group (53.9%,  $p < 0.001$ : Total users: 45.5% male, 54.5% female)].<sup>10</sup> Overall, then, the decision maker regarding elementary school children’s *keitai* acquisition earlier or later is not the children themselves but their parents.

This use of *keitai* to call parents to arrange to be picked up is also associated with early *keitai* adoption by children who attend national or private junior high schools. Moreover, the percentage of respondents who attended national or private junior high schools was 40.7% for the ESS group in comparison with 20.6% for the JHSS group ( $p < 0.001$ ). A majority of the respondents from the ESS group commute by train and/or bus ( $p < 0.005$ ). Conversely, a lot of those from the JHSS group walk to school ( $p < 0.001$ ). Compared to the average 32.82 min it takes to commute for the ESS group, the JHSS group takes an average of 24.89 min ( $p < 0.05$ ).

This time difference relates to the type of school the students were attending and requires a brief explanation. Although for public (municipal) elementary and junior high schools in Japan students typically commute to a school within walking distance from their homes, for private and national elementary and junior high schools, in most instances, students are enrolled through selective examination and it

<sup>10</sup> “Calling to get picked up by parents” is also connected with a gender difference in *keitai* usage. For instance, when both gender groups were asked about voice calling and e-mailing to parents, a majority of females occurred only in regard to calling “to get picked up” (males 31.1%, females 44.9%;  $p < 0.05$ ).

is not unusual for those schools to be far from where the students live. Thus, the difference in commuting methods and times is due to the difference in schools to which the students commute.

There were no statistically significant differences between such demographic characteristics as the age and educational background of the respondents' mothers or the number of siblings or birth order. But in relation to the annual household income of the respondents (22.2% low income, less than four million yen; 53.0% middle income, between four to ten million yen; and 24.8% high income, over ten million yen), there was a significant tendency for respondents of the ESS group to be from higher income homes (ESS group: low, 14.6%; middle, 46.1%; high, 39.3%; JHSS group: low, 27.0%; middle, 57.4%; high, 15.6%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Also, concerning the mothers' work status, in the ESS group, there were more stay-at-home mothers and fewer with part-time jobs less than 35 h per week ( $p < 0.05$ , see Table 1). These trends of household income and mother's employment status correspond with the usual characteristics of students who are enrolled in national or private junior high schools through selective examination.<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, growing concerns about a perceived decline in academic achievement in public (municipal) high schools has led to greater interest in preparation for and in taking the entrance examination for national and private high schools, especially in metropolitan areas.<sup>12</sup> Elementary school children now attending either national or private high schools often used to return home late from cram schools where they prepared for junior high school entrance exams. Under these circumstances, they began to carry a *keitai* to contact their parents when they needed to be picked up from the cram school or train station. Incidentally, in Japan, it is not rare for elementary school children who are attending cram school to commute alone. There are some cram schools, however, where children do not return home until after 10 P.M. In such cases, a majority are picked up by their parents. Because of this—certainly a motivating factor of *keitai* ownership—even for a child presently in their second year of junior high school, it is likely that they would continue to use their *keitai* to call home to be picked up. Related to this, by 2006, the number of public telephones had dropped to only 393,000—less than half that of 1991 when the number peaked at 833,000 (White Paper on Information and Communications in Japan 2006). Thus, the diffusion of the *keitai* has led to a decrease in the availability of public telephones, which in turn has helped make *keitai* indispensable for children.

<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, in this survey, in comparison to those who attend public junior high schools, tendencies could be seen for those who attend national and private junior high schools to have high household incomes and mothers with high academic backgrounds who were dedicated to matters concerning their child's education. There were also many mothers who were full-time housewives or worked 35 h or more part-time. Therefore, rather than *keitai* ownership in the elementary school student group being directly influenced by high household income, it should be considered that a high income household correlates to a child's attendance at national and private schools, which is thus linked to a child's *keitai* ownership.

<sup>12</sup> See *Shutoken de gonin ni hitori ga chugaku jyuken* (one in five elementary students took the selective examination to enroll in junior high school) in “*Sunday Mainichi*” 2 December 2007:72–103; and *2008 nen no chugaku jyuken ha matashitemo “shijyo saidai”* (the number of elementary students who took the selective examination to enroll in the junior high school hits a new high again in 2008.) in “*Economist*” 11 March 2008:68–70.

**Table 1** Period of child's *keitai* adoption and mother's work status

	Full-time	Part-time (more than 35 h)	Part-time (less than 35 h)	Stay-at-home mom
Elementary school student (ESS) group	27.5	12.1	30.8	29.7
Junior high school student (JHSS) group	27.1	10.7	46.4	15.7

(%)  $N=233$

Even though there has been an increase in *keitai* adoption by children, there was no observable relaxation of parental supervisory practices concerning time spent outside the house or curfews, especially when taking the child's gender into account. As expected, attitudes towards parental supervision are more consistent among mothers of girls. In response to the inquiry whether getting a *keitai* led the mother to "stop being strict about their child's curfew or their time spent outside the home", from the following choices of "applies", "somewhat applies", "does not really apply," or "does not apply", 42.5% of the mothers of female students and 19.8% of the mothers of male students answered "does not apply" ( $p<0.001$ ).

In summary, because children return home late from cram school, and/or because a child is female, parents have their elementary-school-aged children carry a *keitai* for emergencies or as a crime prevention measure or as reassurance. Yet parents still do not feel sufficiently assured of their child's safety, and thus, the *keitai* is used for parent-child communication and, when necessary, to arrange for the parent to meet their child to pick them up. Significantly, if somewhat counter intuitively, anxiety about safety is shared with almost all the population and is not itself a deciding factor of children's *keitai* ownership. More important are the material realities of the children's (and their families') lives: their income and employment, the school they attend, and their associated (perhaps prior) extra-curricula study commitments.

#### 4 Early Adopting Mothers

Now I would like to consider the significant role of the mother and her own *keitai* as a factor behind a child's early *keitai* adoption.

First, the rate of *keitai* ownership by mothers of the JHSS group is 95.0%, that of the ESS group is 100% (total respondents, 97.0%;  $p<0.05$ ). Next, dividing the periods when the mothers started using *keitai* into three stages—an early period (1990 to 1997), middle period (1998 to 2000), and late period (2001 to 2006)—the mothers of the ESS group had a tendency to start using *keitai* earlier than those of the JHSS group ( $p<0.001$ ). However, there are no significant correlations between the mother's period of *keitai* adoption and the type of junior high school a child attends or a child's gender. Considering the results discussed above in Section 3 of this paper, this suggests that the factor of picking up a child is not related to the mother's own *keitai* adoption.

To examine this further, children were divided into groups: those who attend national and private junior high schools and those who attend public junior high

schools (hereafter the N/PJH group and the PJH group, respectively). The period of the mother’s *keitai* adoption was noted. For the period of the child’s *keitai* adoption, there were no statistically significant differences observed in the N/PJH group, but in the PJH group, for those mothers in the early *keitai* adoption group, there was a tendency for the children to use a *keitai* from the time they were in elementary school (see Table 2).

Next, considering the mothers who were early *keitai* adopters, there are no statistically significant correlations between their age, occupation, annual income, and period of *keitai* adoption. Examining the mother’s education level by dividing them into two categories (high school education or less and junior college education or higher), early *keitai* adopters were predominantly in the former category and the majority of late adopters were found in the latter category ( $p < 0.01$ ). Also, although some significant differences in values, general sense of trust, social skills, childrearing, and the like were apparent,<sup>13</sup> it was difficult to find any compelling or convincing similarities among the mothers who were early *keitai* adopters.

Rather, the observable difference concerning the period of *keitai* adoption was *keitai* usage. Among the respondents, for the early adopters, there was an average of 116.41 numbers in their personal *keitai* directories, and 115.41 numbers in those of the middle-period adopters, where there were only 72.93 numbers in those of the late adopters ( $p < 0.001$ ). In terms of speediness in text messaging, the early and middle-period adopters felt they were fast or average, whereas the late adopters felt they were slower than others ( $p < 0.001$ ). Regarding information sites accessed via *keitai*, 66.7% of the early adopters, 55.3% of the middle-period adopters, and 33.7% of the late adopters were users ( $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, there was more of a tendency for early adopters to use their *keitai* “anytime and anywhere” than those of the middle-period adopters and late adopters (see Table 3).

Because the factors that instigated the mothers’ *keitai* adoption were not the subject of this survey, the immediate factors that prompted or motivated early *keitai* adoption cannot be determined. However, what is certain is that the mothers of this group are highly familiar with *keitai* and this can be linked to the child’s early *keitai* adoption. In fact, there is a perceivable link between mothers’ and children’s patterns of *keitai* use. Out of eight items concerning each of the respondents’ *keitai* usage, the statistically significant tendencies were seen in four of the following items: “The *keitai* is kept turned on 24 hours a day” ( $p < 0.001$ ), “Even when I’m at home, I don’t use the landline to call friends” ( $p < 0.005$ ), “I’m not concerned about what time it is when I call my friends” ( $p < 0.01$ ), and “Even when I’m with my family, I talk to friends on the *keitai*” ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Although these results imply no causal relations, they suggest the possibility that the mother’s *keitai* usage influences her child’s *keitai* ownership and usage. This also suggests future lines of investigation that might theorize the *keitai* further as a

<sup>13</sup> Statistically significant differences were observed in the responses to each of the following items: “One may do whatever one pleases as long as it does not trouble other people”, “Crime incidents and accidents involving children are on the rise”, “Conversations with strangers usually flow well”, “When trouble occurs between people around me, I can skillfully handle it”, “When I do something wrong, I can apologize immediately”, “I think I might have made a mistake in the way I raised my child”, “A child can make decisions on things that are important to them”, and “I’ve supervised their studies since they were little and would like to continue to as much as I can”.

**Table 2** Child's school type, child's *keitai* adoption, mother's *keitai* adoption

		Period of mother's <i>keitai</i> adoption			<i>p</i> value
		Early	Middle	Late	
National or Private school junior high school (N/PJH) group	Elementary school student (ESS) group	35.1	43.2	21.6	
	Junior high school student (JHSS) group	19.2	50.0	30.8	
Public school junior high school (PJH) group	Elementary school student (ESS) group	41.5	32.1	26.4	
	Junior high school student (JHSS) group	15.2	47.6	37.1	<0.001
Total		25.7	43.2	31.1	

medium—or a cultural vector—in which familial practices, traditions, and values are also transmitted.

### 5 What “Circumstances” Prompt *Keitai* Adoption?

The results of the questionnaire survey suggest that children's early *keitai* adoption is related to (a) commuting to cram school when they were in the elementary school and (b) mothers who are highly familiar with *keitai*. As noted earlier, these seem to be the factors, rather than the more widely expressed concern about safety, that predispose to *keitai* ownership and use. But this leaves the matter of what precisely prompts the decision to acquire a *keitai* insufficiently resolved. This is the question we now turn to: what actual “circumstances” prompt a parent's decision regarding their child's *keitai* ownership?

Based on actor-network theory, Dobashi (2007) suggests that we should not focus on individual “particularities”—reducing the factors influencing such decisions to the specific characteristics, abilities, or tastes of an individual—but that instead we should look at the “environment” of that individual. Analyzing heavy Internet users'

**Table 3** Period of mother's *keitai* adoption and their usage

		Applies	Somewhat applies	Rarely applies	Never applies	<i>p</i> value
Even when I'm with my family, I speak with friends on the <i>keitai</i>	Early	7.2	8.7	39.1	44.9	<0.01
	Middle	0.8	10.6	39.0	49.6	
	Late	1.1	3.2	31.6	64.2	
I'm not concerned about the time when I call my friends	Early	15.9	15.9	18.8	49.3	<0.05
	Middle	9.8	4.9	20.3	65.0	
	Late	6.3	7.3	15.6	70.8	
I'm conscious of the appropriateness of location when I talk on my <i>keitai</i>	Early	71.0	24.6	2.9	1.4	<0.05
	Middle	71.3	24.6	3.3	0.8	
	Late	68.8	14.6	9.4	7.3	



communities of friends and their private rooms, Dobashi insists that the observation of heavy users does not support the argument that there are specific categories of individuals who engage in these forms of internet use. Instead, he argues, his findings suggest that it is possible to identify a type of environment, a pattern of circumstances, conducive to heavy media use—and that this approach could usefully be applied to relationships between media and users in general.

Following Dobashi (2007), then, and based on the interview survey results, this paper now examines the emerging patterns of “circumstances” that make the *keitai*, once felt by parents to be “unnecessary” for children, an item of “necessity”. In fact, what we see is that various circumstances accumulate over time, building a pattern within which initially reluctant or hesitant parents eventually come to see the *keitai* as inevitable.

### 5.1 How Circumstances Accumulate to Prompt a Child’s *Keitai* Ownership

Here, a mother with a daughter in her fourth year of elementary school (10 years old) speaks about what prompted her daughter’s *keitai* ownership:

A: (She started to carry a *keitai*) before the summer holidays. I was planning to go visit my parents, and there had been some inconveniences due to our having separate plans last year, and also she’d been asking for a *keitai* for a long time. I’d always tell her that there was no need, or that it was too early for her to carry one. But even while I myself believed it was too early, when she started cram school in April, her teacher would always lend her *keitai* so that she could tell me she was on her way home. I felt it was a burden on the teacher that she always had to borrow it. Also, on days when it began to rain or when she has to go home alone, I go out to meet her. In effect, I’m like her chauffeur.

Here, we see clearly how an accumulation of circumstances built up to the purchase of the daughter’s *keitai*: first the previous year’s holiday inconveniences, together with the daughter’s repeated requests; then the cram school and the awkwardness of depending on the loan of her teacher’s *keitai*. For the mother who thought that it was too early for her child to have a *keitai*, a series of concrete events made her change her mind to believe that “a *keitai* is necessary”.

Likewise, a mother of two daughters, one in her second year of junior high school (14 years old) and the other in her fourth year of elementary school (10 years old), said:

B: When my eldest entered her first year of junior high, it was inevitable that she started to carry one [...]. My (eldest) daughter goes to a private high school and when she began going to cram school in fifth or sixth grade (of elementary school), she needed to be picked up. She told me that all the other children had them. But I thought that since I was giving her rides, and coordinating the times she returned home, there was no need. I told her if something ever came up to use the public telephone. To e-mail friends, she should use the PC [...]. She agreed, and so she didn’t carry one in elementary school [...]. Even after she entered junior high school, as expected, although they’re not allowed to bring them (to school), about 70 or 80 percent (of the students) have one now. She started to ask for one, but as her parent I wanted to hold off from giving it to her

too early. Then in June, while it was no big incident, when she was on her way home after school one evening, she was somehow stalked by someone though it was still bright out. She was one street behind a big road and felt that something was strange, but as she was trying to be nonchalant about it, someone came up from behind her and lifted up her skirt and ran off. As her parent, I was relieved that that was the extent of it, but it was a big shock to her and she cried on the way home. After that, she asked me to meet her out on the big street. Then, after telling her school (administrator), I received permission (for her to carry one) and that was what prompted her to carry a *keitai*.

In this case, the triggering circumstance was the molestation on the way home, but before this, peer pressure from the daughter's friends and the change to commuting had already paved the way to the decision. We see here that as long as her daughter was in elementary school, this parent still considered it feasible to meet her child at a pre-arranged time. However, generally, once children start commuting by train to a private junior high school far from home, the time they return is less reliable because of unexpected schedule changes, missed connections, and the like. Thus, in order to meet them at the station, a *keitai* is needed to coordinate schedules. Moreover, with a *keitai*, a child can call the moment an unexpected event arises that might affect the arrangements. For parents who had initially wanted to avoid having their child carry a *keitai*—despite their child's strong desire to have one—their child's *keitai* ownership eventually becomes unavoidable.

The fact that parents list several circumstances that prompted their child's *keitai* ownership suggests, first and foremost, that parents themselves do not want their child to have a *keitai*, if it can be avoided, thus reflecting the popular belief that it is too early at elementary or junior high school age for a child to own a *keitai*. To convince themselves and the interviewer (the author of this paper) of the validity of their decision, the mothers may have felt obliged to cite a number of reasons.

In another example, a mother who has not yet given a *keitai* to her son (in third year of junior high school) explained that she had decided to buy him a *keitai* in the future because of the perceived need for communication with peers and for use as a communication tool facilitating high school activities. At the same time, she explained that the reason there has been no need for him to carry a *keitai* thus far was because of his personality, the fact that his close friends are not users, and because he is a boy.

C: Since his first year in junior high, he'd been asking for one. But since he's not diligent, I suggested that carrying one would be troublesome and that he should hold off until he enters high school, which he accepts. But I do often feel bad about him not being able to be contacted by his peers. For example if they send out a message, "Let's all get together at X Park (instead)", he's the only one wandering around (not knowing where to go because of the sudden change in plans).

Author: Is the park local?

C: Yes, it's a local park. It's close to our home [...]. Over two thirds of (his peers) have (a *keitai*). But it's a relief that his closest friend or those in his cram school don't carry one. My son goes to public school and when he sees his

friends who go to private schools, they ask him for his (*keitai*) e-mail address. When he replies that he doesn't have one and tells them that they have one because they go to private schools, they respond that at private school, only a tenth of the students in third year junior high don't have one. In fact, almost everyone has one (laughter) [...]. But on the other hand, I'm wondering what to do about my daughter in her sixth year of elementary school. As expected, most of those around her have one and since they communicate by (*keitai*) e-mail, my daughter is always out of the loop. I feel sorry for her. I've had my son wait for three years, but he says that for girls it's harder, so its best to have her carry one soon.

Author: Are you personally opposed to them carrying one?

C: Yes. But in my son's case, he's heard that in senior high school, all communications for after-school club activities and so forth are conducted through (*keitai*) e-mail, so since I've made him go without one for this long, I've promised to buy him one when he finishes his exams. For the younger one, I'll see how it goes for a while longer, but she'll probably have one earlier than my son.

On the other hand, where the child herself does not have a strong desire for a *keitai*, alternative solutions can be found to dealing with circumstances that otherwise might trigger its acquisition. A mother who has one son in the third year and one in the first year of elementary school (9 and 7 years old) discusses the concrete measures she takes to ensure her younger son's safety rather than buying him a *keitai*.

D: (While pointing to a location on a map) I don't let him go here because I heard there are suspicious people. I don't let him go here because no one can see where he is. I allow him to play here because this Y Park is near his friend's house so their mother can see [...]. When he plays at the children's community center, I call them to send him home after 5, and then the mother of his friend from kindergarten will let him in the apartment building. The apartment caretaker is also helpful, saying “It's dangerous out there, so I'll watch out (for him)”. The neighbors look out and I think we all have a heightened awareness about (child) protection.

In the present pattern of circumstances, she feels a sense of assurance because the child's sphere of activities is under observation by people in the neighborhood, rendering a *keitai* unnecessary.

## 5.2 Parent–Child “Tug-of-War”

Because a *keitai* is a medium that parents prefer to keep their child from using if possible, it is not always bought right away even if the child has a strong desire to have one. Instead, parents use a variety of strategies to delay the apparently inevitable acquisition; their children meanwhile may employ their own strategic discursive devices to hasten their *keitai* ownership. An inevitable tug-of-war between the competing arguments ensues.

As an example of a parental stalling mechanism, one mother loaned her *keitai* to her daughter (9 years old, in her fourth year of elementary school) who wanted a *keitai* so she could exchange e-mails with her friends who had one.

E: When I lent her my *keitai* telling her to use it for e-mailing, for a time, she had a ton of e-mail exchanges with her friends. Then recently, as though the fever had died down, she stopped sending them. “It got to be too much trouble,” she says. Even so, she still says she wants her own private *keitai*.

Some parents take the approach of lending the child their own *keitai*, restricting the loan to specific occasions, for example, allowing the child to use their spare *keitai* while they are together or lending the child their *keitai* only when they are out on their own. Such strategies are also parent–child “tug-of-wars” over the necessity of a *keitai*. However much a child may want his own *keitai*, he will have to struggle to overcome his mother’s opposition if she does not consider it necessary.

F: Even though he wanted one since his second term in his first year of junior high, our rule was that we’d consider it once he got to high school. But then when we visit senior high schools I hear that all contact by the teachers is sent via (*keitai*) e-mail. And also, contact for after-school club activities is also managed by mail. So, we decided that once he got to high school, it would be necessary, and we promised that we’d buy him one once he reached high school [...]. I myself got my *keitai* last December. I didn’t really find the need for one and didn’t understand the convenience of having one. For children, in particular, there’s no need. In financial terms, too, I don’t think it’s right for a child who hasn’t reached the age where they understand the value of money [...]. So then, my son did a lot of research on *keitai* charge plans and services.

Afterward, this mother laughed while she explained that once she herself started to use a *keitai*, she understood why a child would also want one. She could now understand just how convenient it is to have a *keitai*. Whereas the questionnaire survey strongly suggested that a mother’s familiarity with *keitai* is associated with a child’s early *keitai* use, in this instance, we see the contrary: the mother’s lack of experience with *keitai* meant that she had a very poorly developed sense of its convenience, and the fact that she did not find a *keitai* necessary in her own life confirmed her belief that it was not necessary for her child either. However, once she gained a sense of the convenience of a *keitai* through using one herself, and after also hearing that a *keitai* is necessary for senior high school life, she promised to buy her son one after he enters high school.<sup>14</sup> What is interesting here is that in the 2 years that he wanted but was not given a *keitai*, the boy didn’t just wait. During the parent–child “tug-of-war”, since his mother felt that ‘understanding the value of money’ was a necessary qualification for acquiring a *keitai*, the child took the

<sup>14</sup> According to a questionnaire survey conducted by the Mobile Society Research Institute (2006), currently for a great majority of senior high school students, it was advancement to junior high or high school or advancements to higher grade levels within school that prompted their *keitai* ownership. Moreover, according to the same survey, most children’s *keitai* ownership now begins in their first year of junior high school (43.2%). Although until recently it was starting senior high school that prompted *keitai* use, now acquiring one when entering junior high is the more common pattern. This particular child, then, was behind most of his peers in acquiring the new technology.

initiative of investigating charge plans to persuade his mother that he had adequate financial understanding for *keitai* use.

In another case, a child emerged “victorious” in the parent–child “tug-of-war” by using a backhanded technique in response to her parent’s concerns for her safety. The mother introduced in the beginning of this section, who allowed her daughter in her fourth year of elementary school to get a *keitai*, mentioned the following episode shortly after the earlier story:

A: (My daughter) said “Wouldn’t you feel better too if I carried a *keitai*?”

Author: I see...

A: When she put it that way, I felt slightly vulnerable. I think the commercials are to blame. “Give your cute kid a navi (navigation system)”, as the jingle goes. (Laughter)

Here, we see the child deploying the same strategic discursive devices as the telecommunications industry, manipulating the perceptions of risk associated with contemporary childhood and the promise of effective risk management, or the production of reassurance, associated with the *keitai*. As noted in an earlier section, the presumption that children are at risk is generally shared through Japanese society—the child here, realizing this, incorporates risk as a rhetorical device to pressure her mother into allowing her to have a *keitai*. As we have shown, parents may cite safety as one consideration in their decision to get a *keitai* even though it is not in itself a sufficient factor for triggering the final decision. It is interesting to note that risk may be deployed by a child too as a strategic rhetorical device to justify the decision, here gaining the complicity of her parent in the process. The interplay here between advertising strategies, broader public concerns, and personal tactics merits further exploration but is beyond the scope of this paper. Let me simply repeat that within the discourses surrounding *keitai*, the *keitai* is ironically seen as both producing and managing risk, yet the actual reasons behind ownership and use are much less strongly related to these notions of risk than seems immediately apparent.

### 5.3 The Expanding “Necessity” for *Keitai*

How does the *keitai* become embedded in everyday life? How has its role shifted from an indulgence to a necessity? Responses from both the questionnaire survey and the interview surveys suggested initially that children’s *keitai* ownership is prompted by their need to be picked up from school. In fact, if we read more deeply into the survey responses, we see that the “necessity” itself emerged from behavioral patterns of *keitai* usage. For example, one mother was unsure of the need for *keitai* once her sons in their second and fourth years of elementary school (8 and 10 years old) started commuting four stations for after-school lessons. In response to a question regarding the actual necessity of a *keitai* for organizing the pickup, she replied:

G: I guess before people used *keitai*, people just calculated what time to go pick up their children based on what time they’d finish their lessons, and left extra time for adjustment. Hmm...parents have gotten lazy. (Laughter) [...] Now that

we have *keitai*, even though we know what time they'll be coming home, we tell them to call. So, when they call saying they're getting on the train, we've gotten accustomed to the convenience of calculating how much more we can do of what we're in the middle of before going out to pick them up....

As explained by mother B earlier, even if the child does not have a *keitai*, a parent is still able to pick them up. For after-school lessons, the end of the lesson is fixed and one can use the train schedules to estimate the time for the pickup. But in the *keitai*-embedded everyday life, it has become routine to act only after contact is received, thus making the *keitai* call appear a necessary step in meeting their children. Moreover, having a *keitai* has become an assumed precondition in almost all aspects of daily life, not only for pickup times. We have seen how mothers appreciate the conveniences associated with buying the child its own *keitai*. Even if the *keitai* is only a temporary loan, the parents may find its convenience becoming indispensable.

G: When we go to events like an international karate tournament, the children get together with their peers and go off somewhere. Then when the time comes to go home, we can't. So I think in instances like that, a *keitai* is necessary.

E: For after-school lessons, or when she goes off alone somewhere on weekends, she said she wanted one since it's hard for us to reach her. I have her carry telephone cards, but a lot of times there's no pay phone around. I am wondering whether it will really be more convenient if she has a *keitai*.

A: The only time she (uses the *keitai*) is for times when we're at a department store and she wants to go to the bookstore for a while. So we go on our separate ways, which for a mother can be nice. But in fact, even if it might be dangerous, when they reach their fourth year or so (of elementary school), I might say "Wait right here a second", and then we go off in separate directions.

The *keitai* alters patterns of activities in daily life. For example, since the popularization of *keitai*, it has become commonplace not to decide on a specific time or place to meet for social activities. As long as the time and location are roughly decided, parties can work out the logistics by *keitai* when the time comes to meet. Moreover, if a person is going to be late for a pre-arranged meeting, a *keitai* enables them to make instant contact. Thus, it is felt that younger generations in particular have a relaxed perception of punctuality. In the late 1990s, a phenomenon called *puchi iede* (literally meaning "*petit* running away from home"), referring to brief stays at a friend's home by young people in their late teens, aroused concern. But because the child could be reached by *keitai*, it was understood that his or her parents need not worry as much about a child who had not returned home under these circumstances.

As the examples from the interviews reveal, in contrast to the days before *keitai* when parents would accompany their children at all times, now that one can be contacted by *keitai* at any time, the parent and child can act independently of one another. The behavioral patterns among adults with *keitai*—contact via *keitai* to arrange meetings—have been extended into parent-child behavior as well. In this sense, the perceived "necessity" of the *keitai*, a tool that until recently was



considered unnecessary for children, is due to changes in behavioral patterns brought on by the *keitai*. For a parent who has a memory of the behavioral habits of a society before *keitai*, even though it can be said that the *keitai* is now embedded in everyday life, the tensions between convenience and risk are still unresolved and a lurking ambivalence remains: “Even though (the associated patterns of behavior) might be dangerous, (the convenience of a *keitai*) is nice for a mother”.

## 6 Conclusion

In order to understand the decrease in the age of *keitai* ownership in Japan in recent years, both statistical and ethnographic data concerning the factors that prompted parental decisions to allow their child to get a *keitai* have been analyzed and discussed. I have argued that the reason for an elementary school child to possess a *keitai* earlier than other children is not because of some demographic “specificity” but rather is due to an accumulation of concrete “circumstances” that make the *keitai* appear necessary.

In public discourse, *keitai* is mentioned as a measure for ensuring “child safety,” and many parents actually claim that the deterioration of public safety is the main or only reason why their elementary-school-aged children have a *keitai*. However, the anxiety about safety is shared across society and is not itself a deciding factor in children’s *keitai* ownership. In arguing for the purchase of *keitai*, parents and children alike may deploy the moral rhetoric of parental responsibility, expressed alike in commercial advertising and in the panicky discourses of some public political stances. These intersections are worthy, as has been mentioned, of further extrapolation. Certainly, notions of surveillance, risk management, anxiety as social motivation, and the associated political relations within families that deploy these terms and ideas as means of discursive power should be integrated into subsequent fieldwork to determine if and how these social patterns are changing.

For now, I reiterate that the “unnecessary” child’s *keitai* becomes “necessary” in part because of the rise in anxiety about safety and greater awareness concerning children. Dealing with emergencies and preventing crime prevention are key considerations that shape the broader environment in which *keitai* use by children is justified. In individual cases, however, *keitai* usage is not prompted by one particular instigating factor but rather an accumulation of circumstances is necessary. The specific trigger for the decision to allow one’s child to use or own a *keitai* often emerges from a tug-of-war between the child who is desperate for a *keitai* and the parent who thinks it is inappropriate and unnecessary. Moreover, the sense that a *keitai* is a “necessity” for the child—for them to be picked up by their parents, for communication at school or after-school club activities, or when they act independently from their parents—has emerged from the “*keitai*-embedded everyday life” of today’s Japanese society. So the parameters of the “tug-of-war” over *keitai* ownership are in continual flux as the “*keitai*-embedded everyday life” evolves.

If we look beyond the initial acquisition of technology in society, the research into the circumstances surrounding children’s experiences of *keitai* becomes crucially informative. In addition to linking *keitai* usage among children to an understanding of today’s parent–child relationships and family relationships, through looking at

their *keitai*-embedded everyday lives, we might be led further to more general reflections on the nature and dynamisms of technology-embedded everyday life.

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